

Brief Communications

SHAMANS AS NEUROTICS

Honigmann (1960) applauds M. K. Opler (1959) for "refuting Devereux's unwarranted generalization, based on Mohave data, that the shaman is a neurotic who uses socially sanctioned defenses," but:

(1) Disregards the fact that Opler himself also indicts Kroeber and Linton for holding similar views;

(2) Like Opler, seems to ignore that I am—alas—not the originator of the equation: shaman = neurotic, which idea, according to one of its major opponents (Ackerknecht 1943), has a long history;

(3) Ignores Opler's own comment that Kroeber's views are based not only on Mohave data, but also on the Chukchi and on some non-Yuman Californians;

(4) Is not aware of the fact that the theoretical paper in which I state my views and which Opler cites on p. 102 of his work (Opler 1959) but (mysteriously) not in his bibliography, cites not only Mohave data but also data from the Sedang Moi of Indochina, the Sioux, various non-Chukchi Siberians, etc. (Devereux 1956);

(5) Like Opler, apparently chooses to forget that masses of evidence are available for Paleosiberians, Mongols, Turkic people, Finno-Ugrians, South African Bantus, Dravidians, Vedda; for Indonesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, etc., though this is conceded even by Ackerknecht (1943) who insistently denies that the shaman is necessarily a neurotic;

(6) Uncritically accepts Opler's assertion that his Ute data flatly contradict my thesis, though a more critical reading of Opler's own Ute data proves that the Ute shaman is a perfect illustration of my view, in that: (a) The son of a Ute shaman, who sought to obtain supernatural powers by means of an *idiosyncratic* shortcut, developed hysterical blindness, but recovered when, after therapy, he decided to obtain these powers in a *traditional* way (Opler 1959: 110). (b) At least borderline psychotic fantasies are present in the allegedly rational and poised Ute shaman: the fantasy of an internal evil-eating homunculus (p. 108); the idea that the shaman's power may turn against him (p. 109); the belief that the shaman has no control over the evil potentialities of his power and may plead with it in vain to refrain from doing evil (pp. 113-14), etc. (c) The apodictic statement that Ute shamans are rational and poised proves nothing, psychiatrically. I myself—thinking specifically of my Mohave shaman friend, Hivsu: Tupo:ma—wrote in 1938 (Devereux 1939) that the Mohave shaman is rational. However, on a certain afternoon, in 1938, he poured out frankly psychotic material while intoxicated which he then confirmed while sober (Devereux 1948). Until a certain night in 1933 I believed my Sedang Moi shaman friend, He:ang, to be a gay, bohemian extrovert. That

night, however, he had a brief psychotic episode which roused the whole village. This point calls for general comment:

Unless we assume that psychotic eruptions can arise *ex nihilo*, without unconscious antecedents, or that spirit possession (in the occultist sense) is a reality obliging the anthropologist to believe in the existence of spirits, we must assume that a person who briefly lapses into a psychosis has an active, though latent and unconscious, psychotic core. Clinical evidence on this score is overwhelming. Even in our midst seemingly sane persons suddenly decompensate and commit atrocious murders. Harold Rosen, M.D., Ph.D. (Rosen and Erickson 1954) was consulted by a pillar of the community because of torticollis. After being hypnotized and instructed to straighten out his neck, this tower of sanity and fine public speaker poured out classical paranoid schizophrenic delusions. Psychotic breaks often erupt in previously "normal" individuals after cosmetic surgery or after the healing of minor skin lesions through hypnotherapy. Lastly, attention is invited to Reider's (1950) brilliant paper on the neurotic compulsion to seem adjusted and normal—and being a shaman is one way in which one can achieve adjustment, or what Ackerknecht (1943) calls "autonormality."

The diagnosis of latent psychosis or of a borderline condition is a task for clinical experts. The average field worker—and this includes Devereux *in 1938* when he wrote his 1939 paper in which he declared the Mohave shaman a real extrovert—is not qualified to make a valid diagnosis; his statement that the shamans of tribe X seem rational is a lay opinion, not a diagnosis.

A last word concerns Honigmann's failure to detect a basic methodological flaw in Opler's "demonstration" that Kroeber's views and mine are generalizations based on data from a limited culture area. (I am ignoring in this context Kroeber's Chukchi data and my Sedang, Sioux, and Siberian data used in the relevant papers.) Opler stresses that the Californian shamans mentioned by Kroeber belong to brutally oppressed and hunted tribes, which fact, according to Opler, explains why their shamans are neurotics. He then adds in a conceptually and stylistically offhand manner: "Devereux . . . is willing to generalize . . . using his Mohave data which is geographically close to the area Kroeber describes" (p.102). Leaving aside the vexing question of how data can be geographically close to an area, the facts are as follows: (1) The Mohave and the related River Yumans were never brutally oppressed or hunted down; (2) they are at least as distinct culturally from the Californians cited by Kroeber as are Opler's Utes; (3) they are geographically as far from the River Yumans as from the Utes.

The real problem which disturbs Opler and Honigmann is the fact that culturally valued functions can apparently be taken over by severe neurotics, and even by more or less latent psychotics, who have a sound insight into the social dynamics of their role. Yet, one of the world's great mathematicians, Georg Cantor, alternated between being a hospitalized psychotic and being a famous professor and creative scholar. Goethe declared that the writing of "The Sorrows of Young Werther" was, for him, an alternative to committing suicide.

Beethoven, at the time he wrote the Heiligenstadt Testament, was certainly trembling on the brink of psychosis or of suicide. Baudelaire, who not only created great poetry but also thought deeply and clearly about the role of the poet in society, was a drug addict, a pervert, a sufferer from a largely incapacitating neurosis, and a man bent on self destruction on the installment plan. Caesar, St. Paul, and probably also Mohammed were epileptics; Alexander the Great, Poe, Ulysses S. Grant, and others were alcoholics . . . the list is, in fact, endless.

The real question, then, is why learned anthropologists like Opler and Honigmann did not manage, in this particular context, to recall all they indubitably know about Siberian, South African, Bantu, etc. shamanism, and misread their own excellent field data about the Utes and the Kaska, respectively. The answer is twofold: (1) They fail to differentiate between sanity and social adjustment on the diagnostic level, and between psychiatric and anthropological statements on the conceptual level; (2) due to a unilaterally culturalistic—though not necessarily White-ian—focus of interest, they view the finding, that neurotics and/or more or less latent psychotics can perform culturally valued social functions, as a slur and as an aspersion on culture and society. As a result, they unintentionally ignore facts well known to them, and involuntarily illustrate Caesar's cogent dictum: "Homines id quod volunt credunt."

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